

# From Fashion Icon to Incarnation of the Abject: Anita Berber and Otto Dix

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## **Abstract**

Between 1917 and 1923, photographs of the dancer, actor and ‘It-girl’ Anita Berber appeared regularly in the popular Berlin fashion magazine *Die Dame*, which was aimed at an affluent bourgeois audience. In 1925, the German painter Otto Dix, known for his harsh, realist style and interest in the grotesque, painted her famous portrait, ‘The Dancer Anita Berber.’ It showed a dangerous and evil rather than attractive looking woman, her face a deathly mask, with eyes bloodshot from excessive use of cocaine, morphine and absinthe. The painting reflects the fact that by 1925, Anita Berber had fallen from the status of a celebrated, fashionable dancer to that of a ‘Priestess of Depravity,’ infamous for her nude dances, drug use, and scandalous outfits and for such roles as Salomé and other ‘evil’ women. Following her death in 1928, at 29, the *Film-Kurier*, after describing her as an ‘incarnation of the perverse,’ wrote that she represented a generation. This chapter will briefly introduce Berber’s life and work and look at early media representations in the fashion magazine *Die Dame* before focusing on a discussion of Otto Dix’s portrait in relationship to contemporary writing about Berber and Dix from Béla Balázs to Willi Wolfradt and Dix’s own later statements about painting. It will argue that Dix uses specific tropes of early 1920s fashionability from the ‘vampiric’ to the ‘animalesque’ in the painting. It will evaluate the extent to which the types of dangerous femininity Berber enacted both on stage and in life are reflected in her portrait, a painting which exaggerates her decaying body, and the threatening and abject qualities of her appearance. Psychoanalytical theories on masks of femininity by Joan Riviere and Julia Kristeva’s conception of the ‘abject’ will be applied to understand these notions of femininity. The aim is to evaluate the visual impact and dialectics of an image in which Dix applies old-masterly painting techniques to the portrait of a contemporary celebrity. The chapter will conclude that Berber and Dix formed a tactical alliance, in which he used her notoriety for his own ends while she simultaneously cemented her status as an icon of the Weimar epoch.

**Key Words:** Anita Berber, Otto Dix, Joan Riviere, Julia Kristeva, 1920s portrait painting, *Die Dame*, 1920s Berlin, the abject, ugliness, cruelty.

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There can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty as the basis of every show.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Anita Berber and Otto Dix: A Tactical Alliance

In the 1920s, the Berlin-based dancer Anita Berber became internationally famous not only for her fashionable style and nude dancing, but also for her bohemian lifestyle, which included drug and alcohol abuse, as well as open sexual transgression from bisexuality to suggestions of prostitution. In the early twenties, she was a cult figure whose image was disseminated across mass media publications, which included cabaret and film posters, cigarette cards and Rosenthal figurines. She was photographed as a fashion model and celebrity for fashion magazines such as *Die Dame* and for newspapers, as well as drawn and painted by artists in different on- and off-stage personas. These staged images progressively reflected her personal style and self-representation as a ‘vamp,’ a fashionable and sexualised type of modern woman. The art historian Susan Laikin Funkenstein has argued that the dancer was very aware of media attention and cultivated a persona that responded to public expectations.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will focus on what is probably the most famous image of Berber, the oil painting ‘Die Tänzerin Anita Berber,’ created by the German painter Otto Dix (1891-1969) in 1925. Dix and his wife Martha became fans and friends of Berber in 1925, after seeing a couple of her performances and a subsequent exchange of letters. Both keen dancers themselves, Dix painted a portrait of himself and Martha in fashionable dance outfits and make-up, which was also published in *Die Dame*. In one of Berber’s postcards from the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1925 and again in one of her letters from the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1925, she asks Dix for a photograph of her painted portrait. In the letter she writes: ‘I am so happy that the picture is beautiful. Send me a photograph immediately; I have to send it to America straight away, where it will get into a magazine.’<sup>3</sup>

For Dix, the picture also had great significance because it was included in his important solo exhibition in Berlin at the Gallery Neumann-Nierendorf in 1926, where it hung to the left of his programmatic ‘Self-Portrait with Easel’ completed in 1926.<sup>4</sup> The gallery was also publishing adverts around this time, which described Dix as a portraitist looking for projects<sup>5</sup> and Berber’s portrait was one of the finest demonstrations of his technical, old-masterly skills as well as his ability to identify and condense the characteristic features of the portrayed person. The Dix specialist Andreas Strobl has argued that it was in fact his dealer Karl Nierendorf who had come up with the idea that Dix should paint the portraits of ‘well-known people.’<sup>6</sup> Berber’s picture was one of several portraits of interesting ‘types’ well known in Berlin’s bohemian circles but the portraits were not intended to be sold to the portraits’ subjects. In an unpublished letter to his wife Martha from the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1926, Dix mentions that his portrait of Berber has been published in a newspaper: ‘In the Frankfurter Illustrierte my Anita Berber is reproduced.’<sup>7</sup> This statement shows that Dix also took a keen interest in the information circulated about him in the public domain.

Clearly a tactical alliance was formed between Dix and Berber, both seeing the potential of the portrait as a means of making a statement about themselves. For Dix, although he had already made a name for himself, the portrait would help the success of his solo-exhibition at Nierendorf's gallery and thus make a great impact in Berlin and in the national art scene. It would also help him overcome his financial worries as portrait work could be lucrative.<sup>8</sup> For Berber who by the end of 1925 was struggling with her career and health, the portrait gave her an opportunity to maintain the public's interest.

## 2. Anita Berber: Dancer, Film Star, Fashion Model

Anita Berber was born in 1899 to an artistic and especially musical bourgeois family in Leipzig. After working as a fashion model, she started studying dance in 1913 and began her dancing career in Berlin a few years later. She situated herself as an expressionist, avant-gardist performer, often dancing to classical music. Alongside this, between 1917 and 1923, she continued to appear as a fashion model in popular women's magazines such as *Elegante Welt* and *Die Dame*, both aimed at an affluent bourgeois audience. Some of these photographs were also distributed as postcards<sup>9</sup> which provided publicity for her career as a dancer and reflected her status as a fashion icon and celebrity.

Berlin's dance culture exploded after the war in venues from small cabarets to large revues with performances by nude and semi-nude women, made possible by the abandonment of censorship laws in Germany after 1918. Berber performed in the top venues of Berlin. Although there were some restrictions on dancing women, total nudity was permitted for immobile performers. Berber challenged these laws by dancing nude from around 1919,<sup>10</sup> which has been interpreted as 'an indication of her sexual freedom, licentiousness, or scandalousness.'<sup>11</sup> After World War I, Berlin came to be seen as a centre of depraved culture and was even described as a 'prime breeding ground for evil'<sup>12</sup> and Berber was one of its most provocative personalities. She also appeared in a dozen silent films between 1919 and 1924, from mystery stories to sex education films. Her film career, however, went from major to minor film roles as from 1922 cocaine, morphine and alcohol abuse made her unreliable and problematic to work with.<sup>13</sup> A newspaper article from November 1924 suggested that Berber's film career had ended: 'Now Anita only dances, but when they engage her, the directors are always – as Berber reassures me – a little anxious.'<sup>14</sup>

In 1922, she married the choreographer and dancer Sebastian Droste and together they performed 'pieces on themes of death, suicide, sickness and madness that were often based on his and Berber's poems.'<sup>15</sup> Among those were *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy, Suicide, The Woman with the Seven Masks, Morphine, The Corpse on the Dissecting Table* and *Cocaine*. Abjection and the edges of human existence were the subjects of their innovative creative work. Max Herrmann-Neiße, a well-known literary figure of 1920s Berlin, described Berber's

performances as revolutionary and an expression of her independence and added: 'Anita Berber's dances are living fervour, nonetheless cold, unapproachable . . . Something wild and essentially solitary surrounds her creations, one feels the compulsive destiny.'<sup>16</sup>

Berber pushed modern femininity to its limits on many fronts. She moved from her role as a malleable fashion model, suitable for mass consumption, to a self-determined, trend-setting dancer and celebrity and finally to a performer and public figure who expanded the accepted boundaries of creativity and feminine identity in her refusal to adhere to convention.

After two years of marriage, Droste left Berber and immigrated to America. Shortly after this, in 1924, the 18-year old writer Klaus Mann met Berber in Berlin for the first time:

For an 18-year-old such a painted face is unsettling. Her face was a dark and evil mask. The strongly curved mouth was not her own, but a blood-red concoction out of the rouge-pot. The chalky cheeks had a violet shimmer. The eyes required at least an hour of work every day. She talked incessantly and lied terribly. It was obvious that she had taken a lot of cocaine; she offered me some. She was talking with a hoarse voice of the most unbelievable adventures . . . All the while the bitter mask that was her face remained unmoved in the semi-darkness.<sup>17</sup>

This description suggests that Berber adopted the make-up she wore in films and on stage for her everyday identity because of its ability to shock off stage. Martha Dix, who saw Berber's performances with her husband Otto in Dusseldorf, where they befriended her, and again in Wiesbaden, remembered her make-up routine: 'While Anita was taking an hour to put on her make-up, she drank a bottle of cognac, I don't know anything about the drugs.'<sup>18</sup>

When film theorist Béla Balázs published his ideas for a new film theory in *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* in 1924, he used Berber as a contrasting example of vice and ugliness in his appraisal of the film star Asta Nielsen:

She [Nielsen] is never undressed, never shows her thighs like Anita Berber (where one cannot distinguish between face and bum), but despite this, the dancing minx could learn a lesson from Asta Nielsen. With her belly dances she is a lamb compared to the dressed Asta Nielsen . . . [Nielsen's] spiritualized erotic is the dangerously demonic, because it works long-distance through any clothing.<sup>19</sup>

This negative judgement was mirrored in Klaus Mann's assessment of how she was perceived outside of Berlin's demi-monde after spending some time with Berber and her third husband, the American dancer Henri Châtin-Hofmann from 1924:

People were pointing the finger at her, she was outlawed. Even for post-war Berlin she had gone too far. One went to see her on the cabaret stage to get the creeps: apart from that, she was ostracised.<sup>20</sup>

The increasing circulation of negative descriptions of her in the mass media and in intellectual circles leading up to Dix's exhibition at Nierendorf's Berlin gallery in 1926 would have shaped the public judgement of Berber and, as a consequence, how the audience perceived her portrait.

After years of decline, Berber died of pulmonary tuberculosis in 1928 in Berlin, aged 29. She had returned after her collapse on stage while on a long dance tour through the Middle East with Henri. Many of her obituaries discuss her decline from talented, fashionable and promising dancer to a pitiable woman:

But her fame, which was actually of a sad nature, did not derive from this profession [dance] but from her great scandals, which she – addicted to narcotic poisons – provoked whenever she was in a bad mood.<sup>21</sup>

This suggests that between 1924 and her death in 1928 her public persona had been transformed from one of a much-copied fashionable role model and aspirational star to a figure who caused public outrage, and then to one of tragic decline, even of ridicule.

### **3. From Fashion Photographs to Painted Portrait**

Berber's persona became progressively more independent and artistic in her fashion photographs in *Die Dame*. In 1918 she was a model of fashionability and self-possession. By 1923 her pose had become more melodramatic; her clothes more reflective of her dance costumes, her make-up more mask-like, similar to the make-up worn by film actors of the era. She does not smile at the camera but has assumed her on-stage persona. But her idolised representation as a model of modern femininity had begun to reveal cracks. The real consequences of pushing her life of fashionable, modern femininity to its limits had started to show.

Dix, famous for his harsh realist style and interest in the grotesque, painted her portrait two years later. It showed a dangerous and evil rather than attractive looking woman: she has a mask-like face, claw-like hands, and bloodshot eyes from excessive use of cocaine, morphine and absinthe. The painting confirmed that

Anita Berber was losing her status as young, beautiful and fashionable, and had become a 'Priestess of Depravity',<sup>22</sup> a role she had developed with Droste between 1922 and 1924, and a role of which several of her newspaper obituaries reminded the public. Her drug use and nude dances were by then as infamous as her scandalous outfits in her roles as murderesses, prostitutes and other 'evil' women, the characteristics of which were to become the defining features of her 1925 portrait by Dix. The catalogue *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*, which accompanied the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2006, describes Dix's painting:

Berber's cadaverous white face with its red puckered mouth, red nostril, and greenish eye shadow evokes a vampire. Her high-necked long-sleeved dress covers her body closely like the skin of a reptile, her sinuously curved body seems that of a predator awaiting its next victim. Berber exudes raw sexuality and also malaise and corrosion. In no other picture did Dix use red to such menacing and dramatic effect . . . areas of lighter, yellow hues . . . make her appear to be ringed in flames. She is like a flame consuming itself.<sup>23</sup>

Dix's artwork played with the tropes of sexuality and decay that she represented as a dancer, an icon of a decade and a notorious figure. A once powerful and influential woman, a great seducer and creative, rebellious spirit, was now perceived as a threat – perhaps even as someone to be pitied. Dix exaggerated her decaying body and her 'evil' qualities. This, I would suggest, linked the painting to wider trends within the visual culture of the time: a fashionability of the demonic as expressed in vampire-films, sensationalist newspaper reports about sexual murderers, and mirrored, as contemporary film critic Siegfried Kracauer's observed in his book on Weimar cinema, in Weimar Germany's 'fetishistic obsession with the seductive allure of evil'.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Berber's snakelike surface which turned cloth into skin, and her long, pointed fingernails highlight an 'animalesque' quality. This concept was linked to sexuality in contemporary discourses and could also be related to the figure of the 'vamp,' which was gradually going out of fashion towards the mid-1920s. Dix was clearly interested in the link between female sexuality, fashionability and the animalesque, as his many images of attractive as well as ugly women either with catlike features or wrapped in animal fur – painted throughout the 1920s – demonstrate.

The contemporary art critic Willi Wolfradt wrote a revealing analysis of what he considered to be an important programmatic and innovative painting by Dix a few years before the painting of Berber was exhibited: the 'Doppelbildnis' from 1923, a now lost painting of Dix and his wife as dancers, showed both of them in

stiff poses with mask-like make-up similar to Berber. Wolfradt suggested that they were representatives of a then new fashionable type, the products of the accelerated consumer society:

They are the typical vampiric people one encounters everywhere these days, automatons of want, polished and fitted out by [fashionable] ready-to-wear and cosmetics, heart-empty dolls with greedy instincts, representatives of a sphere where smart brutality counts as a badge of honour. . . . Their soullessness is expressed in the ornamental stiffening of their expressions even more shockingly because the effort to create a fascinating physiognomy is expressed so accurately: the atropine-glazed dream-gaze from the inane doll's face of the lady, the energetization and 'iron' mimic in the companion, especially the mouth, hard and moreover coquettish in its cold determination, maybe even painted on.<sup>25</sup>

Some of Wolfradt's terms and tropes can be applied to Berber's picture as well. The representation of vampires, automatons and dolls – all figures that combine heartlessness with brutal instinct and desire – had become common in Weimar visual culture and could simultaneously be employed as critical symbols of alienation in modern consumer culture and as signifiers of fashionability and coolness.

The hands in Berber's portrait also have a specific significance: Dix stated in an interview with Maria Wetzel in 1965 that hands were indicators of the character he tried to capture: 'A hand is not just a flipper that one paints without any effort – it corresponds in its expression completely to the character of the portrayed.'<sup>26</sup> Specifically Berber's fingernails signified her fashionable status – because pointed vampire-like fingernails were en vogue – but also her threatening quality.

In the same interview, Dix also outlined his approach to portrait painting, and claimed that it was better not to know the person too well:

I don't want to know him [the person], I only want to see what is there, the external. The internal follows automatically. It is reflected in the visible. . . . The first impression one has of a human being is the right one . . . The first impression must be kept in its freshness. Once it is lost I have to find it again. This search is necessary, because during the long working process one starts to make everything smoother. To soften the characteristic edginess. That is wrong.<sup>27</sup>

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Furthermore, he stated that after initial drawings of the model he preferred to work on the portrait without the person being present in order to avoid adding too many small details and the work becoming ‘too naturalist.’<sup>28</sup> These statements support the notion that in Dix’s portrait of Berber, his choice of an edgy person helped to create an edgy picture, but also that Dix deliberately used a fleeting impression to shape a stronger, more extreme identity for the sitter by exaggerating features he perceived to be prominent. This allowed the artwork to take on a life of its own, independent of the person who inspired it. As the art historian Adam C. Oellers notes, within the iconography of 1920s portrait painting, there were two strands. One focused on ‘the human within his social context,’ the other on ‘the human as an identifiable individual’:

The reconciliation of both poles opens up a new relationship to reality and becomes the indicator of the realist point of view, depending on whether individuality and exact description becomes volatile and the human drifts into the representation of a genre, or whether the represented person is removed from its natural surroundings and starts to develop an independent life as an art work [Kunst-Eigenleben].<sup>29</sup>

Dix’s portrait of Berber clearly falls into the latter category. Although Berber represented aspects of a ‘type’ of modern woman, she had pushed its characteristics to such an extreme that she became a unique exponent, an individual that stands for herself, removable from her surroundings. The artwork establishes a separate identity, the represented figure turns into an artistic statement, detached from the woman who was its inspiration. As a result, the picture can relate more broadly to the culture of Weimar Germany – Berber’s portrait can signify the threat of the ‘vamp’ to the male dominated order or a moment of historical crisis.<sup>30</sup>

It has become clear that in Dix’s painting, Berber represented something beyond the surface appearance of the woman he knew, but also beyond what photography could capture. As Dix wrote in 1955 about portraiture: ‘Colour photography lacks an expression of the soul. . . . The essence of every person is expressed on his outside.’<sup>31</sup> Whether Dix expressed his admiration or fascination for the real Anita Berber or both, the painting foregrounds her threatening features which the painter determined were her ‘essence’: decay, heartlessness, greedy desire. The following discussion further investigates the abject qualities of the painting, qualities which the real dancer embodied on- and off-stage and which have become the condition for the iconic status of her portrait, cementing her image as an extreme ‘New Woman’ who had left all conventional femininity behind.



#### 4. 'Womanliness as Masquerade'

Berber's on- and off-stage personas resonate with what the British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere wrote in her 1929 article 'Womanliness as Masquerade.' Riviere's psychoanalysis identified that one of her analysands compensated for the intellectual performance required by her professional role by seeking compliments and sexual attention from her male colleagues and audience afterwards. This was, according to Riviere, an attempt at 'disguising herself as merely a castrated woman . . . to make sure of safety by masquerading as guiltless and innocent.'<sup>32</sup> Riviere concludes that 'Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.'<sup>33</sup> Although it is a mask 'behind which man suspects some hidden danger,'<sup>34</sup> Riviere further states that this 'mask of womanly subservience'<sup>35</sup> is usually transparent to other women and only works on men.

In the early and mid-1920s, Berber turned this concept of womanliness as a masquerade of innocence performed by professional women for men on its head. Due to the nature of her public performances and lifestyle she would have been perceived by her male audiences as having many characteristics seen as traditionally masculine: career ambition, creativity, fearlessness and bravery, debauchery and promiscuity. On the other hand her private self was described by a woman, Dix's wife Martha, as 'charming,' 'sweet,' 'natural' and 'delightful.'<sup>36</sup> This is mirrored by Klaus Mann's description of how he had perceived Berber in comparison to his girlfriend before spending any time with the dancer: 'At first I hated her; I found her fascinating, but revolting. My girlfriend defended her, she claimed she [Berber] was touching; I disagreed: she was just unsavoury and brash.'<sup>37</sup>

It seems that Anita Berber's shocking and subversive on-stage personas and public behaviour were a masquerade of 'manliness,' of strength and self-determination while her 'womanliness' was perceived by women as her true 'innocent' and 'touching' self. Otto Dix – in contrast to his wife – created an image of a 'fascinating but revolting' Berber, choosing to exaggerate and enhance her threatening masquerade in this painting, which would survive her private self and determine her image.

#### 5. The Feminine as Object

In her book *Over Her Dead Body*, on death and femininity in literature, Elizabeth Bronfen offers an interesting analysis of deviant women in society. She writes that a 'tragic paradox' arises from the stories of deviant women who need to destroy their own bodies just as 'society must, at least figuratively, destroy her to preserve its rigid definition against the threat of difference, ambivalence and disjunction she embodies.'<sup>38</sup> The concept of woman as 'threat' is echoed in *Powers of Horror*, first published in 1980, by the French philosopher Julia Kristeva, who

identified the ‘potential of the feminine’ as ‘abject and demoniacal.’<sup>39</sup> Kristeva’s concept can add further layers to the existing interpretations of Dix’s portrait of Berber, because the painting exaggerates Berber’s difference: her representation as a dangerous, ‘fallen woman’ in a public discourse supported by the scandal-hungry daily newspapers is visualised. Her deathliness is foregrounded in her corpse-like image; her punishment prefigured in Dix’s painting as a public spectacle.

Kristeva describes the corpse as ‘the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. . . . It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.’<sup>40</sup> Berber’s portrait contains this threat, not only because of her corpse-like appearance in the image, but also because of her association with abjection in terms of her real performances of disturbing and ambiguous, revolutionary femininities. Kristeva writes: ‘Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, . . .’<sup>41</sup> Abjection can be identified in Berber’s use of her own, by then decaying body, and Dix’s way of representing it; both were using her body ‘for barter,’ for career reasons, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter. Kristeva continues that ‘all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. . . . it is the working of imagination whose foundation are being laid here.’<sup>42</sup> Berber personified abjection and was simultaneously created through a process of abjection, the ‘want’ on which artistic imagination is founded. Abjection becomes the condition for the logic of creative production.

Dix himself described his creative process in a 1960s recording of a discussion with friends as ‘following his demon’:

If I had followed the advice of the [local] priest, then I would not have painted a single picture or made a drawing in my entire life. I have to say: I prefer to follow my demon – which leads me anywhere, without telling me what the reasoning is – than a priest.<sup>43</sup>

In his interview with Maria Wetzel, quoted above, Dix also admitted that there was a ‘lust for the grotesque’ in his work, because it shows the true dialectic of ‘how things really are,’ seemingly oppositional qualities such as horror and the sublime, are often very close and the painter embraces this dialectic:

the solemn - and right next to it the comical . . . It was a delight for me that life is like that . . . you can see the human as great – and as small, even animal-like. . . . No, I was not painfully touched by this knowledge . . . After all there is also humour.<sup>44</sup>

Dix's painting of Anita Berber reflects this dialectic as well. He created a polysemic figure in which contrasting characteristics are merged together, just as in the real woman: sexuality and decay, beauty and ugliness, the great and the pitiable.

Kristeva later relates her point about the working of imagination to creative production: 'It is the verbal that discloses the abject. But at the same time, the word alone purifies from the abject. . . . A single catharsis: the rhetoric of the pure signifier . . .'<sup>45</sup> Dix's old-masterly, skilful style of painting becomes the 'rhetoric' that constitutes a defence, purification against the abject that Berber represents. Although the painterly process might have a 'cathartic' element, the final image is rather titillating for the viewer. By creating his own version of her, showing her in decay and possessing masculinity, she becomes what Kristeva describes as a 'burnt offering' in the Old Testament: 'The burnt offering . . . must then re-establish the order disturbed by the breaking of taboo.'<sup>46</sup> Berber was impure and purity was re-established by showing her as if burning in hellish flames (although she is also the fire). She had threatened the supremacy of male creative genius in art through both her creative work and lawless lifestyle. The male artist re-establishes order. As Kristeva frames it: in the burnt offering, the 'corpse topples from being the object of worship over to being the object of abomination.'<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the real Berber went from fashion icon to fallen woman and an object of fascination in Dix's image as deathly and impure.

But, as Kristeva argues: 'The killed object . . . also sets itself up, in the very act of being destroyed, as desirable, fascinating, and sacred.'<sup>48</sup> This idea relates to Kristeva's later analysis of the French author Celine where she asks whether his 'devalorization of sex, . . . marginalized . . . degraded,' could be the 'condition for a phallic idealization of Woman? . . . where abjection vanishes and becomes veneration.'<sup>49</sup> Dix's painterly skill and his aestheticization of abjection turns Berber's portrait into an object of veneration and a valuable commodity.

## 6. Ugliness, Cruelty and Spectacle

If the portrait of Berber can be read as an example of abjection, it can also be read through Theodor Adorno's concept of 'the ugly' and its function in Modern Art, as developed in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970):

The ugly serves its purpose in art, but ugliness and cruelty are not merely the subject matters of art. As Nietzsche knew, art's own gesture is cruel. In aesthetic forms, cruelty becomes imagination. Something is excised from the living . . . from visual experience. . . . It is the original sin of art as well as its permanent protest against morality, which revenges cruelty with cruelty.<sup>50</sup>

Berber's deathliness becomes an allegory for the process of painting itself: the cruelty of the artist's gesture that extracts from the living into the dead material of the canvas. But through his own cruelty, Dix also celebrated the dancer in the context of a society that abandoned her when she crossed the limits of its morality. He revenged society's 'cruelty with cruelty' by turning her into an icon of ugliness – a phallic idealization – through the fetish of a large scale, programmatic painting. The painter creates this icon of threatening femininity in response to a woman who, in real life, had by then lost much of her influence and power. Now it is not the dancer anymore, but the painter who gains 'demonic delight from the horror of the viewer.'<sup>51</sup>

Kristeva's discussion of Celine's written work also identifies a dialectic between cruelty and 'style': 'the drowning of narrative in a style, which . . . incisive, precise, eschewing seduction in favour of cruelty, it is nevertheless haunted by the same concern – to touch the intimate nerve, to grab hold of emotion.'<sup>52</sup> She identifies in his works a 'fascinating crest of decomposition-composition, suffering-music, and abomination-ecstasy.'<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Dix's obsessively perfected painterly technique, his style and composition contrasts with the decomposition, the decay, represented by the painted subject. He references abomination and ecstasy – her drug-fuelled life and ecstatic dance style, the shocking themes of her dances – to grab the viewer's attention and emotion. In a similar vein, Maria Wetzel identified that the uniqueness of Dix's oeuvre lies in a dialectic tension, the contrast 'between the destructive content of the images and the beauty of the old masterly technique.'<sup>54</sup>

In his only published statement from the 1920s, Otto Dix wrote in the newspaper *Berliner Nachtausgabe* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1927 of his doubts that any new forms of expression could still be developed, justifying thereby his return to the techniques of the Old Masters:

For me anyway, the new in painting is in the expansion of the subject area, in the intensification of the forms of expression that are already contained in the Old Masters. For me the object continues to be primary, and the form is created through the object. That's why the question of whether I get as close as possible to the thing, that I see, is of the utmost importance, because more important than the how is the what! Only from the what, the how develops.<sup>55</sup>

Berber – the object – was the starting point of a solitary process of translation and imagination undertaken in order to create an artwork that could capture her rawness better than any of her published photographs. In fact, many years later Dix still expressed a strong dislike of colour reproductions of paintings, confirming his

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belief in the particular ‘aura’ and qualities of an artwork compared to photographic reproductions:

In reality the original is much more disagreeable. Much rougher. More impenetrable. This is a virtue. . . . Everything too quickly accessible – is nothing. Everything skilful – is shit. Everything with a certain awkwardness – is right.<sup>56</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Cruel or not, the spectacularized nature and intensely visual and emotional experience this painting created for contemporary audiences helped Dix’s career, and his attempts to capture the ‘essence’ of a person (whether real or constructed) together with his skilful old-masterly style were tools to achieve this. His dealer Nierendorf’s strategy to use the portraits of famous people, next to less extreme portraits of collectors and friends as advertisements for his skills as a portraitist seems to have proved successful. After the exhibition, several ‘esteemed collectors, industrialists and politicians commissioned portraits of themselves or their wives.’<sup>57</sup>

Almost forty years after Dix painted Berber, the painting also remained an artwork to which Dix was particularly attached. He made an effort to buy it back from the then owner in the 1960s and henceforth displayed it in his family home in Hemmenhofen. The portrait represented Dix’s argument for the superiority of painting in the face of the overwhelming expansion of the mass media because painting provides greater psychological depth compared to the perceived surface value of photography. Berber’s changing public status – from celebrated modern woman, star and model to scandalous ‘fallen’ woman – and the wide dissemination of images and information about her in the mass media provided Dix with the perfect context.

Although Berber’s life and career remained in decline, the painting cemented her status as an icon of her time. Like Luisa Casati and Sarah Bernhardt – as discussed by Per Faxneld in this volume – Anita Berber was a subversive rule-breaker who was idolized by many women. As her lifestyle and performances became increasingly shocking, public opinion and the media turned against her. She went too far and her obituaries mythologized her life as a cautionary tale. Berber did not make any attempts to keep a measure of respectability like Bernhardt, and she did not have the money or aristocratic heritage to protect her like Casati. Berber was a symptom and expression of the permissive and lawless Berlin of the inflation years and she disappeared with it, to make way for a less decadent and threatening feminine ideal.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (Montreuil/London/New York: Calder, 1997), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Laikin Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber: Imaging a Weimar Performance Artist,' *Women's Art Journal* 26 (2005): 29.

<sup>3</sup> Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM), Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Estate of Otto Dix, file IC64. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Otto Dix, *Katalog der Gesamtausstellung, Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf* (Berlin: Kunstarchiv, 1926), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix. Eine Malerkarriere der Zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 125.

<sup>6</sup> Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 125-126.

<sup>7</sup> Dix-Archive, Estate of Otto Dix Bevaix/Chauvigny, 1925-6.

<sup>8</sup> Dix's letters in the Dix-Archive, Bevaix/Chauvigny from January to December 1925 contain many references to his lack of money.

<sup>9</sup> The Tanzarchiv (dance archive) in Cologne, Germany, has collected more than twenty examples of these postcards from between 1919 and 1923.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 86.

<sup>11</sup> Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber,' 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Hecht (an American journalist), quoted in Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic. The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2006), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Sabine Rewald, ed., *Glitter and Doom, German Portraits from the 1920s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 145.

<sup>14</sup> Wallisch, 'Anita Berber', *Neue Illustrierte Filmwoche, Berliner Ausgabe*, 21 November 1924, 751.

<sup>15</sup> Rewald, *Glitter and Doom*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Max Hermann-Neiße, 'Kleine Geschichte des deutschen Kabarets,' in Hermann-Neiße, *Kabarett*, 1924, 73-74, quoted and translated in: Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber,' 28.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' *Die Bühne, Wochenschrift für Theater, Tanz, Mode*, 275/7 (1930): 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Martha Dix in conversation with Lothar Fischer, in: Fischer, *Otto Dix, Ein Malerleben in Deutschland* (Berlin: Nicolaische, 1996), 62.

<sup>19</sup> Béla Balázs *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 108.

<sup>20</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' 43-44.

<sup>21</sup> 'Anita Berber,' *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, 12 November, 1928.

- <sup>22</sup> Mel Gordon, *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber: Weimar Berlin's Priestess of Depravity* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2006), book title.
- <sup>23</sup> Rewald, *Glitter and Doom*, 142.
- <sup>24</sup> Ulrich Doge, Thomas Elsaesser, Laurence Kardish, eds., *Weimar Cinema 1919-1933. Daydreams and Nightmares* (published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art) (New York: MoMA, 2010), 19.
- <sup>25</sup> Willi Wolfradt. 'Ein Doppelbildnis von Otto Dix,' in: *Jahrbuch der Jungen Kunst*, ed. Georg Biermann (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1923), 176-177.
- <sup>26</sup> Maria Wetzel, 'Atelier-Besuche: XX. Professor Otto Dix. Ein harter Mann, dieser Maler', *Diplomatischer Kurier* 14 (1965): 736.
- <sup>27</sup> Wetzel, *Otto Dix*, 737.
- <sup>28</sup> Wetzel, *Otto Dix*, 738-739.
- <sup>29</sup> Adam C. Oellers, 'Bemerkungen zur Ikonographie des Porträts der zwanziger Jahre', *Die zwanziger Jahre im Porträt*, ed. Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg (published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn from 10.9.- 24.10.1976) (Cologne: Rheinland, 1976), 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Andreas Huyssen has argued that the robot and vamp Maria in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* is the incarnation of a raging and sexual femininity that represents a threat to male domination and to the existing order; see: Andreas Huyssen, 'The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*,' *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 210. The feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane identified in the figure of the femme fatale, a woman capable of destroying man through her sexual lure, a symptom of male fears of the emancipated woman during times of historical crisis; see: Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- <sup>31</sup> Otto Dix, 'Gedanken zum Porträtmalen,' 1955, quoted in Olaf Peters, ed., *Otto Dix* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 210.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibdi.*, 101.
- <sup>35</sup> Joan Riviere, *The Inner World*, 99.
- <sup>36</sup> Martha Dix in conversation with Lothar Fischer, in: Fischer, *Tanz zwischen Rausch und Tod*, 52.
- <sup>37</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' 43-44.
- <sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Feminism and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 277.

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- <sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64-65.
- <sup>40</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>43</sup> *Otto Dix spricht über Kunst, Religion, Krieg* (St. Gallen: Erker, 1966).
- <sup>44</sup> Wetzel, *Otto Dix*, 744
- <sup>45</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 23.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.
- <sup>50</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone, 1997), 49-50.
- <sup>51</sup> Wetzel, *Otto Dix*, 731.
- <sup>52</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 137.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>54</sup> Wetzel, *Otto Dix*, 735.
- <sup>55</sup> Otto Dix, 'Das Objekt ist das Primäre,' in *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1927, published in: *Die zwanziger Jahre: Manifeste und Dokumente deutscher Künstler*, ed. Uwe M. Schneede (Cologne: Dumont, 1979), 138.
- <sup>56</sup> *Otto Dix spricht über Kunst*
- <sup>57</sup> Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 117.

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